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AUTHOR Freedman, Janet
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ABSTRACT

Current and possible future roles of feminist librarians in the academic community are explored in this paper. The discussion opens with a recounting of past accomplishments of feminist librarians in general--e.g., reversing the Library of Congress use of "women as exceptions" subject headings--and follows with descriptions of recent accomplishments of one librarian and her staff in managing an academic library and teaching bibliographic instruction from an openly feminist perspective. It is suggested that the feminist management style is tolerated because it is seen as being in keeping with the stereotypical view of librarianship as a women's profession, and because it effectively services the patriarchal institution; however, this style and perspective is not recommended as a model for others to follow. The origins of women's studies curricula are recalled and women faculty members are urged to work with librarians to analyze and take action in transforming the role of all women on university campuses. Women in academia are also encouraged to make connections outside the campus community with all disenfranchised and disempowered groups. The impact of library automation and increased uses of technology on information dissemination are briefly discussed, and feminist librarians are urged to make the study of information--its availability, its organization, and its dissemination--a vital part of their discourse within the library profession, and to work with women's studies faculty colleagues to make this a central component of the women's study curriculum. (SD)

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Information for Transformation: The Perspective of a Library Director

Janet Freedman, Dean, Library Services
Southeastern Massachusetts University
North Dartmouth, MA 02747

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I'd like to begin my presentation by asking you to do what I did as I began thinking about what to share with you today. Take a moment to recall the times when discovering information transformed your life. Jot down the very first thing that comes into your mind. After a few moments of reflection what other events, experiences enter your thoughts?

When I did this exercise my memory took me to a celebration in a church basement in August, 1970 - the 50th anniversary of Women's suffrage. The program included women displaying art and reading poetry about their own lives, a karate demonstration by half dozen strong women and the distribution and discussion of a small newsprint pamphlet called "Our bodies, Ourselves." The information I received and exchanged that day changed my perceptions of the world and set me on a course of action to change the way I would live in the world.

Our program today gives us a chance to explore together how as feminists, as librarians, we can we work with our colleagues on campus and in the community to provide information that is truly transformational - that can awaken new possibilities for living, working, learning. What we feminist librarians have done already is reason to celebrate ourselves. We've seen to it that works by and about women

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are in our libraries, and that they are accessible to users - we even changed the subject headings under which works about women were listed, reversing the Library of Congress' use of descriptors such as "women as authors," "women as artists" and other "women as exceptions" to female role stereotypes. We've created the chief access tools to the literature of women's studies, and each of us within our own workplaces has compiled bibliographies, created displays of resources, sponsored lectures and readings, made available the superb films depicting women's struggles and triumphs and guided the research of women's studies faculty and students through formal bibliographic instruction programs and daily interactions at the reference desk.

It is in these interactions with library users that feminist librarians have the most challenging opportunities to share information for transformation. My own model is my friend and co-worker, Shaleen Barnes who embodies feminist principles in all her work. She has helped me realize how much more I can learn and teach and has inspired me to combine classroom teaching with my administrative responsibilities. In the past two years I've developed and taught two courses for the women's studies program at Southeastern Massachusetts University. Despite a number of years of previous part-time teaching and my own considerable experience as a reference and instruction librarian, I still call on Shaleen to conduct the class on research sources and approaches. Unlike my past bibliographic instruction classes which crammed as much information about every

resource pertinent to the subject as I could fit into the short session, Shaleen begins with the students' own experiences, interests and needs. Their sharing of the frequent frustrations and occasional successes using libraries immediately creates a climate of engagement and dialog upon which Shaleen builds during her presentation. Rather than tell students what they should know, Shaleen draws upon what they do know, empowering them as learners. And in asking about their current needs for information in their daily lives, she usually discovers a subject which is a perfect vehicle for a discussion of the searching process - and frequently can be linked to the material in the course. While she does show and explain a few principal tools, most of her class is devoted to the process of gathering information within - and beyond - the library, with emphasis on strategies which might be particularly helpful for the topics students have chosen or are considering for their projects or papers.

The success of an innovative library intern program is due to Shaleen and other public services librarians. About nine students are selected to work with the professional library staff as associates in the instruction program. The interns often help librarians gather resources for a class and are then available for a one-on-one session with the many students who enjoy working with a peer in compiling their initial bibliographies.

As much as it pleases me to boast about my talented staff, my specific role on this panel is to address the topic of libraries, librarians and women's studies from the perspective of a library director. For me that means making sure that staff members like Shaleen have the support and resources to do their excellent work. It also means that I speak with a woman's voice as the administrator of the library and in all my interactions within the campus and the community -- that I openly, consciously, work as a feminist.

Ursala Leguin notes that the mother tongue employs language, "not as mere communication, but as relation, relationship. It connects." We all know that it is not always easy to speak with a woman's voice - to build relationships and connections, particularly within a bureaucratic institution. In the university, as in most other organizations in our society we are, to quote Leguin, "valued by men only as an element of their experience, as things experienced. Anything we may say, anything we may do is recognized only if said and done in their service." So, although the library is acknowledged as a very productive and effective unit with notably higher morale than other segments, the leadership approaches I've consciously adopted from feminist theory and practice are not necessarily recognized or cited as a major contributing factor to our organization's success. Indeed, I am acutely aware that my attention to service, call for ethical practices, appreciation and nurturance of staff are viewed as the appropriate "feminine" style well-suited to the

female-stereotyped profession of librarianship. Leguin's appraisal is accurate - my leadership style is tolerated when it works in the service of a patriarchal institution, but it is certainly not embraced as a model for others to follow. The administration of our university is hierarchical and power-brokering, One upsmanship and behind-the-scenes "deals" characterize the modus operandi.

Because I am a feminist I am seeking transformation -so I continue to try to introduce a woman's voice in the forums where I am able to speak - and sometimes it is heard. But I and members of my staff are threatening not only when we speak or model a new notion of power. We also threaten when we ask for a share of power, as presently defined, in an organization that would prefer to keep both feminists AND librarians in their places. The fact that librarians at Southeastern Massachusetts University have considerably less status and pay than their faculty colleagues in the same collective bargaining unit is a feminist issue which should be subject matter in a women's studies curriculum. It is interesting to remember that many women's studies programs were created when women on campuses began analyzing their own experiences and status within their institutions. Female faculty understood the subordination of women as a class when they discovered that their own PhDs and publications were worth less simply because of their gender. Some of these women organized successfully to correct faculty salary inequities. But the fight must not stop when SOME women have

achieved improvements. In the hopes that this session would be attended by many of our faculty colleagues, I'd like to urge that they continue to work with us to analyze and take action on the role of all women on our campuses -librarians, adjunct faculty, (a group which, according to a recent article in Feminist Teacher is 40% female as contrasted with the 12% of women who are tenured faculty) secretaries, food service personnel, and students.

It is painful for me to acknowledge that male-identification is still pervasive on college campuses, even among those involved in women's studies. Regretfully, Adrienne Rich's fears that women's studies would become "the dutiful daughter of the white patriarchal university" have been realized in some programs. Of course, I would like to be able to assume that women's studies departments would take the lead in addressing and changing the myriad ways academic institutions privilege what is male-associated and diminish what is female, but I am aware that this simply is not the agenda of many of the people with whom I work at the university -including some women's studies faculty.

And even if it were, the struggle for a feminist transformation certainly cannot be confined to the academy. Speaking with a woman's voice means that we make connections and common cause with ALL women and with other disenfranchised and disempowered groups. As many of you do, I work with a number of groups in the community, including the

New Bedford Women's Center, a multicultural agency offering health care, rape crisis and battered women's programs. Although I have learned and received much more than I have given, my skills and experiences as a librarian and an administrator have proved useful. Not only is it gratifying to provide information and service to community women; it is also an essential reminder that, as importan as the scholarship about women and the campus victories for women are, feminist transformation depends on a fusion of theory and practice affecting women of all ages, cultures and economic circumstances. If we ourselves are working in the community, we can contribute toward strengthening the connections between theory and practice. And we can link our women's studies courses to community needs, opening opportunities, for example, for women's studies students to do internships and volunteer in community agencies and organizations.

The final point I'd like to touch on today relates to "genderfication" of information itself. In the introduction to Women's Place in the Academy, Marilyn Schuster and Susan Van Dyne discuss women's studies in the context of the development of computer technology. I quote "As is the growth of computer science, the explosion of research on women's experience is a revolutionary factor reshaping American education in the final two decades of the twentieth century. The adaptability of the computer to all areas of the curriculum and its transforming effect on what and how we

learn are widely recognized by administrators. The need for computer literacy has already spurred faculty retraining programs on nearly every campus and has been identified in many institutions' core education requirements. The impact of scholarship about women throughout all academic disciplines and on our pedagogy has been steadily growing and may have an even more profound effect than the computer on how we understand human experience, how we organize knowledge and how we teach our students."

I was fascinated that the authors conjoined the computer and feminist scholarship and pedagogy. What is lacking in their utopian prediction is an analysis of the social organization of information and the technology employed to distribute it. Theodore Roszak's Cult of Information describes libraries as "the missing link between the computer and the public." His book reveals that class interests and sexual stereotypes preclude technology in the public domain. If the information needs of all were to be served through libraries the sales potential of personal computers which Roszak calls "an affluent, middle-class appliance - like the Cuisinart and the stereo set," would be limited. Roszak notes, too, that the stereotype of the library as a female-dominated environment associated with the "old" book culture is contrasted with the fast-paced, masculine world of "bustling executives" and "world-beating decision makers."

The fact remains that what it is important to know and to communicate is still determined by patriarchal norms. While my own university has enthusiastically invested in the computer revolution, there has been no commensurate - in fact there has been almost no - support for the women's revolution.

I can think of few of the technological applications on our campus that have dramatically changed, for the better, the lives of women workers and students. Assignments at a computer terminal have not given most workers more control over their work lives or earned them increased respect, although there is evidence that physical and mental health problems have increased. Our university's on-line management information system produces mounds of data, but decisions are not made any more quickly, or wisely than prior to its introduction. And although I am not an expert on computer applications to the curriculum, I feel that some (by no means all) actually restrict the development of a critical approach to learning. Some of the innovative applications I've seen demonstrated allow myriad manipulations of a limited quantity and quality of data which could narrow possibilities for new insight.

As a university library director, I am acutely and sadly aware that automation is perhaps the only area of library service which will be supported with increases in staff, equipment and supplies. Our co-professionals see illiteracy

grow while neighborhood public library branches and school libraries are closing. Yet large investments are being made in library networks which can identify and transfer specific information sought by and understandable to a very small percentage of those people who want and need to be informed - and transformed.

There is not time today to explore the ramifications of these observations but I'd like to urge us as feminist librarians to make the study of information - its availability, its organization, its dissemination - a vital part of our discourse within the library profession and to work with our women's studies faculty colleagues to make this a central component of the women's studies curriculum.

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